



## East Asians in the Cheka

### Negotiating the Boundaries of National, Political, and Social Identities

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#### ABSTRACT

Despite the proclamations of socialism and Lenin's revolutionary cry, "Workers and oppressed peoples of all countries, unite!" (1920), the Chinese and Koreans in the Russian empire after the 1917 Revolution found that having the correct ideology (socialism) was simply one of the several boundaries that they would need to pass on their route to being accepted as socialists or as "comrades." A second primary theme is that of the Chinese who joined the Soviet "political police," that is, the Cheka. The Chinese Chekists were often a mercenary-like force who participated in many of the most brutal and unsavory operations of the political police. However, as migrants and Russian/Soviet minorities, they faced equally difficult struggles for recognition, equality and the right to citizenship. Their struggles involved navigating the metaphysical borders of identity, categorization, laws, cultural identities, language, religion and marginalizing tropes. These are all elements which reinforce the "racial uniform" of the marginal man (Park 1914, 611).

#### INTRODUCTION

... in Kiev the living would be buried for half an hour in a coffin containing a decomposing body; also in Kiev, the imaginative Chinese Cheka detachment amused itself by putting a rat into an iron tube sealed with wire netting at one end, the other end being placed against the victim's body, and the tube heated until the mad-

dened rat, in an effort to escape, gnawed its way into the prisoner's guts.

— George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police*

Repression was no new role for Latvians in Russian tyranny: they had been hired to help Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great achieve absolute power. The Latvians in the Soviet Cheka were not, however, mere mercenaries.... In 1919, 75 percent of the Cheka's central management was Latvian. When Russian soldiers refused to carry out executions, Latvians (and a Chinese force of some 500 men) were brought in.

— Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen: The Tyrant and Those Who Killed for Him*

Examining the two epigraphs above, one might deduce that the Chinese in the Cheka were very cruel and sadistic (top) or that Red Army discipline, using Chekists, was very strict (bottom). Unfortunately, there is very little information about the role of the Chinese in the Cheka and their motivations, beliefs and aspirations for participating in the Russian Civil War. The Cheka was feared and fearsome because their methods, writ and powers were extra-legal. During several of the most trying times of the USSR, the Cheka/OGPU/NKVD were given the privilege to be judge and executioner on the spot.

Therefore, it would be of historical importance and add to our knowledge of Soviet intelligence to know more about the Chinese and why they were pared down from 1200 in 1922 to around 60 to 100 by late 1923, despite performing admirable service during the entire Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War. For the most part, the Chinese Chekists and their characterization remain but "curios" and "exotica." This article will attempt to develop the "curio" into a three dimensional "personage." By doing so, it re-frames them as three dimensional (and historical) villains, heroes, and every day Soviet "comrades."

This is not to disparage any who have included the rare vignette of Soviet Chinese or Korean Chekists, Red Guards or GRU agents (attributing to them typically one-to-two lines), but rather to make the point that this article intends to amend this underdeveloped depiction by using the most robust methodology possible (in situ interviews, fieldwork, the collection of personal photos and archival work).

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## METHODOLOGY: ORAL HISTORY AND FIELDWORK IN SITU

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In the field of history, the archival document is typically seen as a primary source more “pure” than that of fieldwork or interviews with non-state actors due to the archival document containing a more linear statement of truth and account of history.

However in order to produce a vivid, three dimensional rendition of history, oral history that is, interviews and fieldwork should be conducted. Typically, oral history presents and elucidates a personal history with much more drive, “agency,” and detailed information from multiple viewpoints than the state archives (Howell and Prevenier 2001, 17-27; Chang 2016, 180-185). In my opinion, it is this type of research combined with contemporary photographs (from the subject’s personal albums) and archival work which produces a much more genuine “social history” with a view “from below” (Fitzpatrick 2008, 690; Fitzpatrick 1999, x-1; Chang 2019, 263-270). Through fieldwork, I was able to meet seven families who had relatives in the Soviet OGPU/NKVD (the Soviet political police) or GRU (Soviet military intelligence) in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Both are former union republics of the USSR. This was an opportunity to obtain a level of historical depth that few researchers have ever obtained.

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## DEMOGRAPHICS AND ETHNOGRAPHY A SHORT SUMMARY

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Around 1910, the Chinese population in Russia west of the Urals was listed as being around 100,000 (Benton 2007, 21). At the same time, A.G. Larin a specialist on the Chinese community in the Russian Far East calculated that there were 111,466 Chinese in the region in 1910 (Larin 2003, 18). Thus, the total figures would be 211,466 and perhaps higher due to an undercount of around 30 percent in official statistics (Toropov 2001, 151). A small number of the Chinese community had already resided in the Russian Far East for several generations. After the Priamur and Primore were ceded to Russia in 1858 (Treaty of Aigun) and 1860 (Treaty of Beijing), 64 Chinese villages (settlements) which were located on the Left Bank of the Amur river were allowed to remain in Russia untouched (Malozemoff 1958, 25). However, in 1900 after the Blagoveshchensk massacre, the 64 villages were dispersed and the residents were replaced by Cossacks (Jackson 1968, 25). Some of the Chinese from these villages made their way to the Russian Far East. The Chinese population in Russia continued to

decrease beginning in 1921 when many of the Chinese laborers and former Red Army partisans and soldiers were evacuated or sent home from Russia.

The Chinese population in the USSR fell to 38,000 by 1937 (Benton 2007, 27). Men outnumbered women, typically 98 to 2. For example, in 1916, in Vladivostok, the Chinese population was composed of 38,192 men (97.5 percent) and 995 women (2.5 percent) (Fujita et al. 1995, 568). Most of the Chinese men in the former Russian empire and USSR married local Russian and Ukrainian women depending on their place of residence. From my experiences through interviews with people of full and partial Chinese descent in the former USSR, the wives were typically Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars and Koreans. The Chinese in the Russian Far East through 1937-38 were overwhelmingly from Shandong Province. The province with the second largest number of Chinese was Hebei (Benton 2007, 27). A Soviet document on Chinese citizens applying for residence visas in the Ussuri oblast (Primore) in 1935-36 lists thirty-five men. Thirty-three of the thirty-five men were from Shandong Province and the remaining two were from Hebei (Archives: RGIA-DV f. 163, o. 1, d. 1-B, ll. 37). Larin found that of the 8,000 Chinese in Moscow in 1928, most were from Shandong with 1,000 from southern China (Larin 1998, 294).

The first generation of these “mixed race marriages” were typically given Chinese and Russian names, but listed as “Russian” or “Ukrainian” in their documents or passports. The Chinese wanted their children to be considered as natives to Russia or the USSR despite having an Asian “visage.” The reason for this is that some faced daily indignities and discrimination as foreigners or aliens. About the Chinese in the Russian Far East (including Harbin), Stephan wrote, “In Vladivostok, Chinese were mimicked, muddled, and mulcted. Such hooliganism was publicly deplored but officially winked at” (Stephan 1994, 74).

Most travelers, commentators or historians noted that the Chinese were more difficult to assimilate than the Koreans (Arsenev 2004, 242-243). Datyshen affirms that this was the case even during the Soviet period. He stated, “Those Chinese who remained in Russia during its early Soviet years clung onto their traditional culture, which contributed to their seclusion and kept them from membership in public parties, trade unions and community organizations. Most of them remained citizens of China; nevertheless, the Soviet government tried hard to instill in them revolutionary ideals.” Datyshen expressed a point of view which did not see race, the lack of language ability and or

familiarity with Russian cultural norms as playing any role in their (Chinese) lack of assimilation or integration into Soviet society (Datyshen 2016, 26). Immediately after the establishment of the USSR (Dec. 30, 1922), M.I. Kalinin gave a speech in Vladivostok in 1923 about Soviet socialism and its offer of real equality and the “class line” to the “Easterners” of the USSR, that is, the Koreans and the Chinese within Soviet borders. Kalinin implicitly outlined what the socialist “class line” entailed, what sometimes happened in reality (non-Marxist practices) and the potential loyalties of the “Easterners.” He read to the crowd of local Soviet cadres (Russians, Chinese and Koreans) the following:

The competition of “yellow” labor with Russian? “Yellow” labor—this needs to be discarded from the lexicon. “Yellow” labor like labor in general has no color. [Applause]. In a number of historical conditions, the “yellow” population has become accustomed to a poor living standard with fewer requirements [“provisions provided”] than the Russian population.... Workers who come to us [the Easterners], we must consider as members with equal rights, take into the unions, raise their pay to that of Russian workers, and use all means to reinforce this, so that our Chinese workers are brought up to the political self-awareness of the Russian workers. If we fulfill this, then our worries will not come to pass (Archives: RGIA-DV, f. 85, o. 1, d. 16, ll. 23-24).

Others found the Chinese to be more introspective, somewhat timid and clannish or that they would seek support in numbers huddling with their own compatriots no matter where they went. Wirt Gerrare gave a firsthand example of this on a steamship on the Amur among Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Koreans, Manchus and Chinese in 1903. He wrote, “The Chinese kept themselves apart, as they always do, but they bandied jokes with their neighbours and behaved as the others did” (Gerrare 1903, 165). At any rate, the Chinese who came from Manchuria and North-

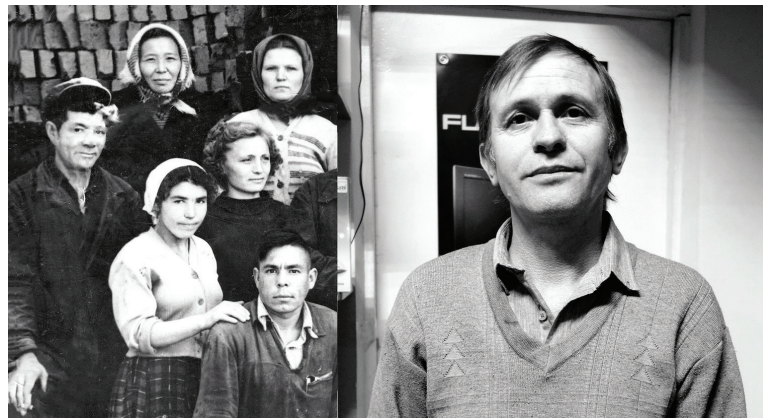


Figure 1 — Photo at left — Nikolai Li Vin Tiu (far left) with his coworkers in Ulan Ude, Buryat ASSR, USSR, 1961. Right photo — Aleksandr Li Vin Tiu, 2016, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Photos courtesy of A. Li Vin Tiu and Jon Chang.

ern China and who had assimilated to Manchu or Mongol cultures (in north-western Manchuria near Inner Mongolia prior to the 1930s) displayed an entirely different demeanor and toughness (Latimore 1935, 62-66).

Aleksandr Li Vin Tiu is a Russian man who has Chinese ancestry and can remember some

Chinese being spoken by his father. This author has collected several (around twelve) interviews among the Chinese of the former USSR and people of Chinese descent. Typically, it requires some time spent with the subject in order to collect the interviews since strangers do not typically give biographical interviews. Li Vin Tiu (Aleksandr’s grandfather) was a Chinese man from Shandong Province, China who crossed into the Ussuri (the Primore) in either 1895 or 1897. He was born in the late 1870s. His work consisted of collecting and selling ginseng. Within a few years, he met and married a Ukrainian woman named Oksana. They moved from the Zabaikal region to the city of Chita. Aleksandr’s father Nikolai was born in 1930 and was listed as “Russian” on his passport as is Aleksandr. Nikolai married a woman who was half Tatar and half Polish. His wife’s father (Aleksandr’s grandfather on his maternal side) who was registered as a Tatar on his Soviet passport was also part Polish. Aleksandr’s family has adopted their paternal grandfather’s entire name as their surname (Li Vin Tiu). Nikolai knew some Chinese (mostly songs) and could prepare a few Chinese dishes. Other than these practices, their family was not able to retain much Chinese culture or any of the Chinese worldview(s). Aleksandr’s history is typical among most of the mixed-race Chinese of the former USSR or “Russians” with Chinese ancestry (Li Vin Tiu 2016).

The official history of the Koreans of Russia and the former USSR begins in 1863 with the crossing of thirteen Korean families from northern Korea into the Ussuri (Primore) region. Within one-to-two years, there were at least seven Korean villages in the Poset district which bordered Korea. By 1870, there were 9,000 Koreans in the Primore growing not rice, but typically millet and various sorts of wheat and cereal



grains which the Russian population used to make bread(s), porridge and other products. The Korean community in Russia quickly grew to 54,076 in 1910 according to Anosov (31 percent were Tsarist subjects) and 81,825 by 1912 according to a second source, Lee (Chang 2016, 12-13, 29).

Also by this time, the residents of the Russian Far East (abbreviated as RFE throughout) began to call the Koreans and Chinese “yellow yids” or “yellow hordes.” They drove salaries down for the average Russian worker in the RFE (Anosov 1928, 11; Forsyth 1992, 221). P.F. Unterberger, the future governor-general of the Priamur (1906-1910) added to this depiction and negative animus toward the new East Asian colonists and immigrants by stating in 1900 “... though the Koreans with a few exceptions have retained their own nationality [ethnicity] completely and remain in all aspects to us an alien people. We absolutely cannot rely on the fidelity of this element in the event of war with Japan or China” (Chang 2016, 22). Unterberger did not want Koreans on Russian soil at any costs stating, “I prefer a barren land, but Russian than a cultivated region with Koreans” (Anosov 1928, 13). In 1914, there were 64, 309 Koreans in the Primore region (Anosov 1928, 27). The opinion expressed by Unterberger (a Baltic German) was a common view held by Tsarist Russian officials toward their national minorities, non-Slavic migrants and Siberian natives. On the other hand, migrants from Korea often preferred to take their chances in Russia than remain landless peasants.

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#### CHINESE AND KOREAN WORKERS TO RED GUARDS: BEGINNINGS

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The Chinese laborers and migrants first arrived in Russia in August 1915 to build rail lines throughout European Russia. Of the 100,000 plus Chinese workers in the Russian empire during World War I, over 22,000 were sent to Murmansk to construct the Murmansk railroad (Lohr 2003, 176-177). The Labor Corps typically worked on: railways, carpentry, cooking, cleaning, laundry, digging trenches, and unloading supplies and munitions at the front (behind the troops). In Russia, many Chinese also worked at munitions and armament plants in Moscow and St. Petersburg/Petrograd (Frey 2009, 46). Thousands of Chinese from the Labor Corps also worked in the mines in the Donbass, the Urals and Siberia (Smith 1983, 22).

Eduard M. Dune’s memoir, *Notes of a Red Guard*, gave an inside view of the October Revolution from a former Red Guard and his work inside the Provodnik factory in Petrograd.

There appeared to be several hundred (or more) Chinese workers in the plants in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) in 1917-1918. They spoke Russian poorly or not at all and the vast majority of their time was spent among their own co-ethnics. They lived in mud barracks under the orders of a Chinese contractor who hired them. The contractor was protected by twelve Chinese guards who walked with him throughout the plant wearing and carrying a long knife at the waist. In March 1917, the Chinese workers overthrew the contractor and his guards in the spirit of the times and the Russian Revolution. The contractor left, but took with him the wages which had been advanced to the Chinese workers. The Chinese workers left hurriedly as they needed work, pay and food (Dune 1993, 11-12).

Chinese workers seemed to have a particularly difficult time in the Moscow and Petrograd (St. Petersburg) factories in communicating with others, defending themselves and their rights during disputes and clashes with other workers. Their lack of decent Russian language skills seemed to be the primary reason. Nativist and or populist sentiments by “Russian” workers toward the Chinese also played a role in the disputes (Wade 1984, 177).

In a second account, Dune tells a Cossack about the Chinese. The Cossack wanted to know why the Latvians and Chinese (probably as Red Army or Cheka units) always followed around the Bolsheviks. He stated “ ‘The Chinese are worse than the Yid [Jews].’ ” Dune explained to the Cossack that the Latvians and Chinese were also human beings and tried to dispel the Cossack’s belief in populist rumors. Finally, Dune tried and failed to convince the man that the Chinese and Latvians did not come (to Russia) to exterminate Christians in the Russian empire (Dune 1993, 144-145).

In addition to finding work in factories, some of the Chinese and Koreans found work as Red Guards (the predecessor to Soviet police and policemen) which were armed workers’ militias organized by local, districts or regional Soviets (worker’s unions) in factories, associations and industrial and commercial enterprises throughout the urban areas of the Russian empire. Red Guards began to be organized around late March 1917 (Wade 1984, 7, 80).

In the Paramonovskii settlement in the Donbass, there were 27 Chinese and 3 Austrian Red Guards. In the Almazno settlement, there were Chinese, Germans, Czechs, Slovaks and Poles in addition to Russians, Ukrainians and Cossacks (Wade 1984, 278). There is a report that Chinese in the Red Guards in Minsk numbered over 1,000 (Benton 2007, 24).

The Chinese in the Red Guards is an example of the “agency” of the Chinese. Many possessed poor Russian language skills, yet they were resolute in wanting to participate in this revolution and the Bolshevik movement. Korean Red Guards were numerous and prominent, but mostly located in the Russian Far East rather than in European Russia. Of a total of 330 Red Guards in the city of Nikolsk-Ussuriisk, 57 were Koreans in May 1918 (Hara 1987, 9). There were likely many other Korean Red Guards and Chinese as well in the cities throughout the Russian Far East (Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Blagoveshchensk, Nakhodka, etc.) but those numbers are not currently available. Poset district (in Russia) which borders Korea likely would have possessed many Korean Red Guards since most of the communes, artels, villages and hamlets were majority Korean from the 1900s onward.

In August 1917, the Red Guards began to receive more Bolshevik ideological and military training. Prior to the October 20th, 1917 the Red Guards were part of the BMO (Bolshevik Military Organization). On October 20th, the Red Guards were absorbed into the Military Revolutionary Committee (Daniels 1984, 110-111, 117). During and after the October Revolution, Chinese in the Red Guard protected and held watch over the Smolny Institute where Bolshevik leaders resided through March 1918. The Smolny garrison protected the headquarters of the revolution by surrounding it with machine gunners and armored cars (Larin 1998, 292; Daniels 1984, 126). Later in September 1918, Chinese “internationalist” regiments guarded the Bolshevik leadership in the Kremlin (Butt et al. 1996, 38).

### THE 1920S AND THE APPEAL OF VARIOUS FORMS OF SOCIALISM, ANARCHISM, COMMUNISM. WHY?

In 1918, three out of four Chinese miners in the Donbass region (Ukraine) joined the Red Army rather than continue to work as miners (Benton 2007, 24). One might ask, “Why would a Chinese laborer, sojourner or even resident of the Russian empire chose to risk his life in war rather than continue to eke out a comparatively healthy salary in a region which was rich in soil and possibilities?”

It has been this author’s experience that the Chinese and Koreans of the early 20th century were captivated by ideas of equality and change (revolution) through social democracy and socialist ideals. Most of the elderly Soviet Koreans who had were born between 1913 and 1932 or so, did not see themselves in strict

terms as Chinese or Koreans, but rather as Soviet “internationalists” much like their Soviet leaders Lenin, Trotsky and many others (Chang 2016, 45-54). Ven Sian Liu, a Soviet Chinese GRU agent who came to Russia in 1913 at the age of nine was also very loyal to the USSR and Soviet socialism (Abuziarova 2017). Pavel Sudoplatov who began fighting with a CHON detachment with the Red Army at age fourteen in 1921 said of its foreign fighters: “In our division, there were Poles, Austrians, Germans, Serbs and even Chinese fighting together with us. The Chinese were very disciplined and fought to the last soldier” (Sudoplatov 1994, 8-9).



Figure 2 – An Illustration in the Soviet newspaper *Krasnoe znamia* [Red Banner] entitled “Revolution.” The illustration shows a Chinese peasant striking down the rich and established of China (landlords, capitalists, merchants) and those who support them (the Chinese policeman). Courtesy of *Krasnoe znamia*, June 6, 1925, issue 27(1442), page 1. *Krasnoe znamia* served the population of the Russian Far East.

What led so many East Asians to Soviet socialism? First, the Soviet Union offered scholarships and pre-university scholarships (to study the Russian language prior to matriculation to a university) to aspiring Korean and Chinese socialists. Typically, the Chinese or Korean students could matriculate at the KUTV (Communist University of the Toilers of the East), the KUTK (Sun Yat-Sen Communist University of the Workers of China; both in Moscow), the Chinese Lenin School (in Vladivostok), the Korean Pedagogical Institute in Nikolsk-Ussuriisk in the Russian Far East or a host of other options.

Second, the idea of a world revolution to overthrow the colonialism of the Western capitalist nations and Japan was strong in China and Korea



at the beginning of the 20th century. It was socialist ideology with the message that in this scenario, the weak would topple the strong/their overlords.

### THE “I” IN SOCIALISM: PART OF THE APPEAL FOR EAST ASIANS

However, the most attractive part of the socialist message to the young Chinese or Korean firebrand was that they themselves were an absolutely essential part of the upcoming world socialist revolution. The message was “you matter, you count.”

Soviet socialism offered a mix of progressive ideology, nationalism, revolution and individualism (that “I” am the spark and my voice is valuable).

Unfortunately for many East Asians, their first experience with a Western society was in the USSR or Russia. The level of individualism and individual rights even in Russia/USSR was much greater than that of China or Korea of the 1900s to 1930s. Thus, many East Asians (with no experience living in other Western countries) fell head over heels with socialism equating Soviet socialism with relatively high levels of individualism and agency. They did not know that “individualism” was a prominent feature of every Western or European society (as compared to East Asia) and that it was even a larger part of the aforementioned societies than in Russia. However, this “infatuation” was to be severely deflated with the start of the Great Terror in the 1930s and the deportation(s) of the Soviet Chinese and Koreans.

Here are some testimonies from interviews collected by this author from Soviet Koreans in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan regarding individualism and old Korean culture and discipline. Chan Nim Kim (born 1929 in the RFE) said, “The father or the elder in the village had absolute control. From the 1920s and 1930s, some of us might have wanted to marry Russians, but we just couldn’t and that was it. You could not decide for yourself like you can now. The Koreans that we have today here in Uzbekistan (circa 2009) are nothing like the Koreans of the past” (Kim 2009a).

Vadim Kan who was born in 1945 in Kazakhstan stated, “The discipline of the Koreans in the past [prior to the late 1920s] was tough. The father tells you to do such and such and you have to do it exactly this way



Figure 3 – Vadim Kan, July 24, 2014 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Photo by author.

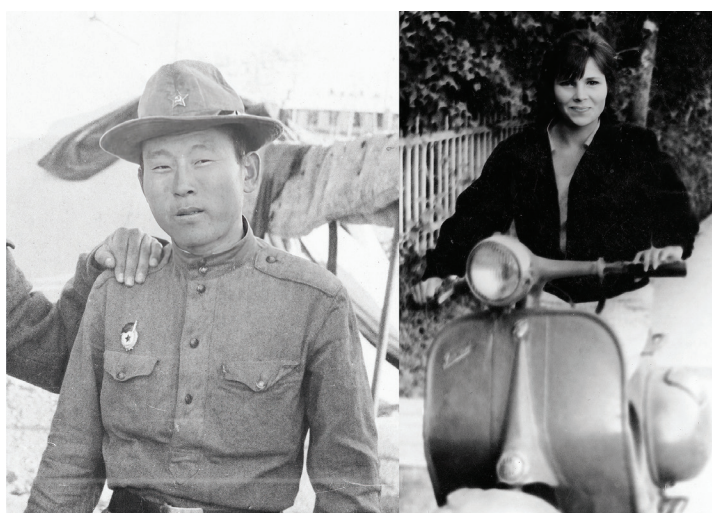


Figure 4 – (left) Sergei Kim in Red Army uniform, 1967 in Batumi, Georgia. (right photo) Vera, Sergei’s fiancé in 1968. Vera was a Komi-Permiak (ethnicity). Sergei wistfully passed Vera’s photo to this author as we sat in his home in Politotdel (collective farm), Tashkent, Uzbekistan. His (Korean) wife looked over as he was passing me the photo. Photos courtesy of Sergei Kim.

or there would be some sort of punishment. Luckily for me, things got better by the 1950s. By that time, if my father told me what to do, I could at least think about following some of the guidelines and then, do as I liked. There was only one parallel with the old ways and just that tough discipline and that was with the Chechens. When we saw Chechens and how their families worked [Vadim grew up on a collective farm with many Soviet peoples—mostly Russians/Ukrainians, Koreans, Kazakhs and Chechens in Kyzyl Orda, Kazakhstan], our parents would tell us that that was what old Korean society was like. Everything with them [Chechens] was strict if it was commanded by an elder male who was a relative” (Kan 2014).

Sergei Kim ran into “old Korean traditions” in 1969 when he brought home Vera as his fiancé. All of his six or seven brothers and sisters met her and

approved. But his parents didn't. A few of the brothers or sisters tried to reason with the parents for Sergei (the youngest in the family). Sergei stated that he saw his father hit them directly in the face for questioning his decision. After four to five weeks, she left and he accepted that he would have to marry a Korean (Kim 2009b).

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### FROM LABORERS AND RED GUARDS (POLICE) TO CHEKISTS

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Many of the Chinese who became Chekists began by working in Russia as laborers, factory workers, petty merchants selling goods from China, navies, farmers and the like. The first step that they usually took was to join the Red Army or the Red Guards. Once they had a taste of military or martial life, they simply joined the Cheka after the October-November Revolution. Wade provides a good description of how some of the first Cheka troops were recruited in late 1917-early 1918:

Thus, when the Sovnarkom created the Cheka in a resolution of December 7 it is not surprising that the Red Guards [police] were drawn in. One of the most important Petrograd Red Guard leaders, Evgenii Trifonov, was sent from the General Staff of the Red Guard to participate in establishing the Cheka. About 30 picked guardsmen were assigned to the first Cheka armed formations in Petrograd. In January, the General Staff of the Red Guard ordered all district Red Guard staffs in Petrograd to provide guardsmen to fill out Cheka units (Wade 1984, 317).

Wade's *Red Guards and Workers' Militias* further explains that the aforementioned arrangements and others like it took place in many cities throughout Russia and the soon-to-be USSR. Additionally, both institutions were formed with the primary purpose of "combating counter-revolution."

Returning to the theme of social borders, Eduard M. Dune noted how the Chinese, Jews and Latvians were socially estranged or seen as "alien" to Russians, Cossacks, and the common peasant in 1917. One fisherman from the Don stated to Dune (partly paraphrased), "... the Bolsheviks are not so bad themselves, but 'the Chinese are worse than the Yids.' The Yids eat rotten pikefish, but the Chinese even eat possum and frogs" (Dune 1993, 144-145).



Figure 5: A Chinese internationalist Red Army regiment, Petrograd (St. Petersburg), 1918. Photo courtesy of N.A. Popov, *Oni nami srazhalis za vlast' sovetskuyu*, page 59. Photograph part of "public domain," over 75 years old without copyright of the original photographer.

The Chinese were also socially distanced due to their lack of ability to speak Russian fluently. Dune wrote, "There were also several hundred Chinese at the factory who, like the Sarts, could not understand a word of Russian and so had no contact with other workers" (Dune 1993, 11). Bolshevik workers in Petrograd factories voted to add yellow laborers to the list of peoples or social groups evacuated from the city. Workers at the Pella plant in Petrograd added to this list the people who can only say " 'War to Victory!' " (Smith 1983, 173). This anecdote explains that many foreigners in Russia who did not speak Russian were added to the lists of various councils (soviets) or rights groups with the simplest requirement of merely saying, "War to Victory" or other such socialist slogans.

Despite their limitations, many Chinese in Russia were determined to contribute to the Russian Revolution and to be seen as equals (one of principal leitmotifs of the Revolution). On the other hand, the Cheka itself saw foreignness as an asset and actively recruited Latvians, Poles, Hungarians, Chinese and others because of their lack of fluency in Russian and most importantly, they could be counted on to carry out their orders without remorse or hesitation, that is, they would not be able to understand the pleas of their victims (Gerson 1976, 128; Rayfield 2004, 72). This inability to properly communicate caused them to be seen as simply "executioners."

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### THE CHINESE CHEKA THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS AND THEIR DISAPPEARANCE

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This section will cover the historiography of the Chinese Cheka and their contributions to the Rus-



sian Civil War and later, their sudden disappearance from the archival records and various literatures after 1922. Rayfield's *Stalin and His Hangmen* mentions that some five hundred Chinese Cheka and an unknown number of Latvians were brought in to carry out executions which Russian Chekists had refused (Rayfield 2004, 72).

Mereto wrote that the Chinese and Latvians (Letts) played a prominent role in the Red Army as its executioners extraordinaire. The peasants and general masses upon seeing how well the foreign regiments lived (Latvians and Chinese) felt even more alienated from the Bolshevik regime. The Chinese Cheka helped the Red Army maintain "iron discipline" (Mereto 1920, 138, 172). These Chinese regiments were most likely either the CHON, VNUS, or Vokhra (all are special purpose Cheka) regiments (Leggett 1981, iv).

Beginning August 30th, 1918, the "Red Terror" was initiated due to the assassination of the Petrograd Cheka head, Uritskii and an attempt on Lenin's life by Fanny Kaplan. Two of the three shots from Kaplan's pistol struck Lenin, one of which went through Lenin's neck. From this period onwards to the end of the Russian Civil War (1922), there was a tremendous amount of repression, beatings of workers, threats, reprisals and excessive requisition-

ing which left the peasants with little food and livestock. After August 30th, the Soviet state also began to repress any political opposition, dissent, and those who wanted more democratic elements in their dic-

tatorship of the proletariat. The numbers of arrests, exiles (to various labor camps) and executions by the Cheka went up dramatically. However, Lenin seemed to have been planning the use of greater force anyway, as the Bolsheviks had restored the death penalty on June 16, 1918 even before the Red Terror began (Brovkin 1994, 45-47, 104; Leggett 1981, 102-111).

In March 1919, in Tula, Russia the living conditions worsened, food was scarce and anti-Bolshevik sentiment began to rise quickly. The key issue was the fact that plant workers were receiving food rations, but not their families. The workers were agitated and began to cause unrest (ie. work stoppages) at some of the key Soviet armament plants. Kaminskii who was the head of the local Soviet held a meeting with the agitated workers. He promised to meet their demands. Instead, he used Chinese Chekists to arrest and detain over 200 plant workers (Brovkin 1994, 159). Note that these detentions most likely included torture as this was a specialty of the Cheka. It appears that the plant workers were merely striking for full benefits to accrue to their family members. It is also significant



Figure 6 – A White Guardist anti-Bolshevik poster circa 1919-1920. Note in the bottom left hand corner there is the depiction of a Chinese Chekist or Red Army soldier. Photograph part of "public domain."

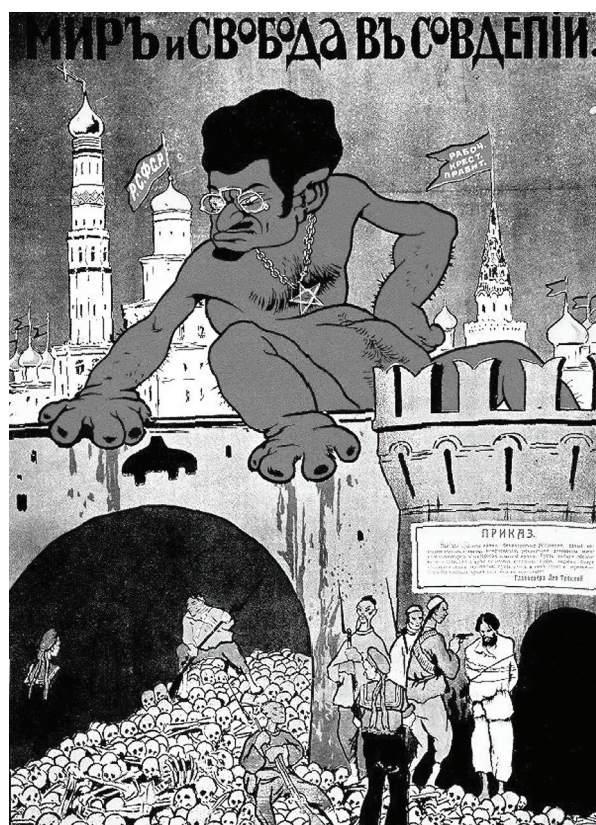


Figure 7: A Whites' propaganda poster issued 1919 – "Peace and Freedom under Soviet [Power/Rule]" with Trotsky seen as epitomizing the Bolsheviks. Note Chinese Cheka at the bottom of the poster.



how the Bolshevik regime put an end to this strike by using as much force and repression as possible. This was hardly the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” a common Soviet slogan. These heavy-handed tactics would set the tone for Soviet life certainly until the Gorbachev regime.

It is at this point (one and one-half years after the Revolution) that many of the Chinese Cheka should have requested further language and ideological training. The Cheka also had commissars for ideological training (called *politruki*). If one wants to be accepted and participate fully in the Revolution and the Civil War, there has to be communication in order to become fellow “comrades.” Unfortunately, neither they nor their superiors had the foresight to bring this about.

The Chinese Cheka despite participating in some of the most decisive battles of the Russian Civil War remained “socially estranged” and appeared to most to be “automatons of death” (see Figure 7).

In summer 1919 in Tula, Dmitry Os’kin [*sic*] commanded a brigade of Chinese Red Army or CHON (the text did not indicate which affiliation). Their primary task was to stop the flow of desertions in the Red Army. Os’kin assumed that the Chinese were less merciful than the Russians (Figes 1997, 599). In August 1919, a Chinese Cheka regiment was sent to Moscow to guard the Lubianka headquarters (Leggett 1981, 264).

Vladimir Brovkin mentions Chinese CHON (special purpose regiments of the Cheka typically used to quell rebellion in the Red Army) regiments in Belarus. Around March 1919, the Gomel Party apparatus had 1,965 employees or cadres. They needed reinforcements. Therefore, they sent for more than 100 Chinese Cheka. CHON and two internal security troops (VNUS and Vokhra) contained a large number of Latvians, Chinese and Hungarians. In the Urals, the CHON, VNUS and Vokhra numbered 20,408 soldiers (with a large contingent of non-Eastern Slavs as mentioned above). In Moscow, the three special purpose Cheka groups numbered 27,128 from documents dated October 1920 (Brovkin 1994, 159, 383). These Cheka units took part in suppressing the Tambov insurrection from 1920 to 1921. In February 1920 and for a short while afterward, (it is assumed at the beginning of their use in the Tambov area), they were under the command of Vseobuch (*sic*),<sup>1</sup> the Red Army Staff’s Directorate for military training (Leggett 1981, 227).

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1. Today “Vseobuch” is popularly written as “Vseovobuch,” among historians and academics, *Vse obuchenie* (general learning/education/training) versus *Vse-vo-buch*—General Military Training—*Vse voennoe obuchenie*.

On November 14, 1920, Wrangel the Commander of the White Army fled with 146,000 of his troops to the Crimea where they were evacuated to Constantinople. The Civil War was effectively over in Southern Russia (Mawdsley 2000, 270).

In spring 1921 with the Russian Civil War mostly won except for pockets of resistance in Siberia and the RFE, the Cheka and other state security organs began evacuating foreigners who had served in “internationalist” brigades, labor brigades and the like, based on order no. 9612 which was issued in February 1921. Russian (Tsarist) subjects such as Latvians, Lithuanians, Finns and Poles were exempt. However, the Chinese in Russia without citizenship (or who were not Russian subjects) were given strong encouragement to return home. This “encouragement” took the form of the Red Army veterans being refused residence permits or visa extensions (Karpenko 2007, 321-326).

Many Chinese men (including Chekists) found Russian, Ukrainian or local wives. In some instances, there were Chinese who had served in the Red Army and had married local women and were still refused citizenship and or residence visas. In Kiev prior to the summer of 1937, a Ukrainian writer noted that there were Chinese children playing in the streets who were native speakers of Russian (Ho T’ien Ma 1949, 173; Kuromiya 2007, 125). They almost certainly would have had to have been mixed-race (with Russian, Ukrainian, Polish and Jewish mothers) since very few Chinese came to Russia with their families (Chang 2016, 102).

The Chinese in the Red Guards and Cheka were generally not demobilized until after April 1921. An NKVD order on September 29, 1922 ordered all foreigners in the Don guberniia (province) within a two week period to register with the local NKVD bringing with them: three photos, certificates of identification, documentation regarding their residency and their questionnaire forms in order to receive Ukrainian citizenship and or residency visas (depending on eligibility). Yet, Karpenko affirmed, “Many foreigners were not able gather the necessary documents” or gather documents that had the certifications or were properly confirmed such as prior citizenship and passports (Karpenko 2007, 324). It was at this time (1922) that the number of Chinese Cheka was pared down from (the author’s estimates) somewhere around 1,100 (maybe more) to around 60 to 100.

By late 1922, the Soviet borders had been secured and the last Entente force occupying the Russian Far East (the Japanese) had just evacuated in October. If the USSR had wanted to keep the Chinese veterans of

the Soviet army and Chinese Chekists in the recognition of their contributions and as part of a class-based socialism, the state could have easily done so. After all, on paper, the residency and citizenship requirements were not stringent at all. It simply depended on how the requirements were enforced and on whom. In the case of the Chinese (versus Poles and Latvians), most were refused visas and Soviet citizenship despite presenting the proper paperwork. Afterward, they faced the so-called “evacuations” of former foreign fighters. After October 1922, there is little or no mention of the Chinese Chekists in the western borders of the USSR (Shapoval 1997).

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### CONCLUSION

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The Cheka and the Chekists saw themselves and their organization as the blade of the Bolshevik Party’s will. In their eyes, without the hard edge of steel and some leeway for mistakes including excesses of violence, the Party’s will could not have become reality.

Regarding the Chinese Chekists, they were pared down from around 1100 at their peak numbers to around 60 to 100 Chekists by 1923. Why? First, unlike some of the Jewish, Latvian, Greek, Armenian and European Chekists, the Chinese could not “pass” as Russian and most importantly, most lacked the requisite Russian language skills and familiarity with Russian culture. In every society, those who do not resemble the dominant racial or ethnic groups are typically seen as being more “alien,” less loyal and receive more social and institutional racism than those who can “pass” as Russian or Ukrainian (Park 1928, 890).

Second, perhaps the strongest explanation is simply that the Chinese were needed during the Revolution for the qualities that they provided. After the Civil War and the securing of the Soviet borders, the Cheka/GPU/OGPU needed agents, not executioners. The Chinese Cheka had primarily been executioners with only a few regiments with people capable of being “agents.”

Third, the idea of following a strict class line and practicing real socialism was always a utopian ideal. All of the early “Old Bolsheviks” and the Soviet leadership core had developed many of their worldviews during Tsarism which would make the implementation of a relatively pure socialism very difficult. Finally, the Chinese Chekists lacked representation and connections in the leadership strata in all of the major Soviet institutions (the All-Union Communist Party, the Central Committee and the Cheka/GPU itself).

The Bolshevik Revolution like many others contained strong elements of theater, irony, utopianism, terror, and pathos. Revolutionaries are rarely saints. The Chinese Chekists were one of the first collective victims of the Bolshevik deviation from the “class line” once the Soviet borders were secured. This case offers a meta-narrative on how societies, revolutions and utopian ideologies really work. A further lesson is that of how one bridges the metaphysical borders (constructed and natural) of human heterogeneity, that is: identity, culture, language and race/ethnicity. The latter elements emphasize how important discourse (whether written, voiced, electronic, via print or media) and communal proximity (social interaction with or without discourse such as sharing a meal or working together) really are in bridging spaces of liminality (Monaghan and Just 2000, 91-101).

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